

Collected Stories, Catherine Kim © 2018

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Cover image: Gustave Courbet, “Fox in the Snow” (1860)

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Editor's Note

This is a test. The booklet in your hands is a sample issue for a forthcoming series of texts written and published by trans women, something which has never been seen before. We know this is true because there's no project like this to be found online, in any library, even in memory.

And yet this is false. It must be. Of course, there have been efforts like this in the past in some form or another. Efforts that have been lost because trans women's writing has the curious property of vanishing almost as soon as it is brought into being.

But we don't write in order to live eternally. We write for ourselves, for the sense of agency and strength and for the bit of cash there is to be had from this work. We could be drawing intricate lines in the sand for an audience and that would be no better or worse than writing if it helped us to survive as writing does. We write for each other too, because each of us has needed trans women's words and images to find ourselves, to know where we stand—and that goes for cis readers as well. I mean, without us, what would cis people know about themselves? Without our bodies to mark the lines of binary gender's violence how would they speak or think or live, right?

It's important not to take this too seriously, though. We're here only for this moment. Let us be as free as we can. Let's dream of healing for a little while. Or trace the lines towards devouring our demons and destroying police stations, border fences, mansions, prisons, military bases, better yet the logic of exploitation and control that makes them possible. All in good fun.

Jamie Berrout

COLLECTED STORIES

Catherine Kim

Melancholia (I)

Her name is Alice, and she's more than five years your senior. Which doesn't seem like much until you realize that she was in her graduate forensics program before you stumbled out of high school, with a diploma in the wrong name and the prescription you've wanted ever since your voice *cracked* like a nursery rhyme tossed off a great height. Some days you wake thinking you can still hear your father's footsteps plodding across the kitchen tile, frying up rice and eggs with too much grease sizzling in the saucepan. The scent of burnt canola oil, the way it splatters on the cookery, buries in your nose like a ghost digging itself back into its grave. The phantom lingers as you rub the sleep from your eyes, half a decade lost in time, in a one-bedroom apartment you share with a girlfriend whose side of the bed is always cold in the mornings. And you realize you're old enough now to almost feel comfortable in this kind of relationship, with a lover who likes having you around for talking or for sex but doesn't really *need* you in the way you expected. There's a photograph of her on your nightstand held up by a creative use of novelty paperclips. She's standing in front of a movie poster for *La Vie d'Adèle*, sticking her tongue out in an effort that's part playful and part obscene. With the top row of her teeth biting into the wet muscle, and her head cocked to the side like a baffled bird. In the mornings when you're not quite sure whether the years since you moved out of your father's house weren't some cooked-up fever dream—when the chronology of your transition lies in as many pieces as your girlfriend's rare attempts at scrambled eggs—that four-by-six photograph you got printed at a corner pharmacy is a slow

reminder that enough of what you have is real.

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It doesn't always work to your satisfaction. Relationships are an iterative series of best efforts and compromises. Sometimes Alice is there in this strange night terror of your childhood home, sympathizing with your father's burning breakfast from her spot by the kitchen counter. Toying with an unopened pack of cigarettes she scrounged from the cupboard with the plastic utensils and packets of take-out mustard. She's talking to your father as if she's known the man forever, knows exactly which buttons to push to set him off or shut him down. Dressed like a tomboy with ripped jeans and her breasts bound under her loose-fitting college shirt. With her hair pulled back and her biceps damp with a hint of sweat, she might pass for the boy you should have been in a different life. In this delusion, your father looks almost proud, that if you can't be cisgender then at least you might be trying for a straightness that's always eluded you. He can adapt to this, just like he fumbled through learning how to work a computer and the English language and his white supervisor's curious fetish for spicy "ethnic" foods. There's a girl that looks like a boy, with a boy that looks like a girl, and it fits without too much friction. Without sparking the fire that could collapse what little remains of his family down on his shoulders.

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When you break up with her, it's with the ache of iron and

gunpowder buried in your hands. It's just the two of you at the dinner table in the house she grew up in as a teenager. Her parents have retired to their separate rooms, though you can hear the groan of the wood as Mrs. Park paces back and forth like a slow, mechanical pendulum, gradually exhausting herself as the kitchen clock hits midnight and the pedestal for a missing figurine pops out of the plastic with a *chime*. Words tumble gracelessly out of your mouth like a queue of jumpers off a rickety bridge. Alice is gorging herself on leftovers she didn't have the stomach to eat when her mother was watching for her posture and manners and slim physique. She's half-listening to you, chewing with her cheeks full and a thin film of disappointment that doesn't leak out of her eyes. *He wouldn't have hurt you*, she says, a dribble of melted fat from the fried beef slipping down her chin. *It's illegal*, she adds, like that's necessary to explain why her father hadn't used his Glock to put a bullet between your eyes. *It's stress relief*—and she makes a motion with her chopsticks, pointing to the stereo with a gospel hymn on mute, framed calligraphy on the wall at the head of the dining table, the cold banchan in the Tupperware bin from which she scavenges pieces to put on your plate, and to the two yellow girls speaking fluid English about the imminent breakdown of their relationship. Like it would explain her father's penchant for cowboy hats and dreamcatchers, or her mother's insistence on sitting in the back pew as the only Korean family in a white church on Sunday.

You think back to when Mr. Park took you to the shooting range, while his wife distracted Alice with photographs from a distant relative's wedding venue. To his calm and steady shots tearing through the shaded silhouette of a limbless head and

torso. How he looked at your skirt and your trimmed, painted fingernails before gripping you by the shoulders and calling you *young man*. You learned the recoil of a handgun feels like a stranger's thrust inside you during a particularly unremarkable one-night stand. A touch obscene, with the *clack* of the slide and the weight of the trigger held in the hook of your finger. You missed every shot that you took. It's no great disappointment. Not after Mr. Park carved a straight line through his target with a heavy scowl and his hobbyist's marksmanship. Not now, as you sit across the table from your girlfriend of so many years, who argues for your relationship like she would fiddle with her fingers through a family prayer. Mrs. Park is still pacing back and forth in her bedroom upstairs. The rice cooker in the kitchen releases a hiss of steam. Alice looks at you fondly, digs up a single spiced cucumber from her dish, and reaches over the table to slip it between your lips.

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You follow Hyejin up the steps to the cemetery, balancing a cooler in one hand and a shovel in the other. The path up the incline is marked with posts adorned with festive bulbs, and the light layer of snow blanketing the pale grass is dancing with a spectral iridescence. The aftershock of your last shot of whiskey crawls up your tongue with sticky hands, numbs your nerves enough for the fresh snow to feel pleurably cool against your naked feet. Behind you, Hanna curses over the weight of the corpse in her duffel bag, body parts clamouring like sturdy dishware through the damp canvas. Ahead, the rest of your friends are waiting, illuminated by the slow morning reach-

ing past the forest to cradle their silhouettes. Madison's already digging up the dirt before a cracked tombstone, herself a ruin of sweat and tears. Max is leaning against a nearby sepulchre, cradling his wrists, cigarette butts scattered like bullet casings at his feet. He's flirting with the lyrics to a song you've heard on the radio, his voice cracked down an octave from his old pitch, and never on key. Alice meets your eyes for but a moment, with that odd half-smile on her lips you never could read, before she turns her attention back to her phone. It's been the better part of a month since Rachel Moon's funeral, when her father took her corpse and sheared her hair, bound her breasts, and plucked the feathers from her mottled wings. Since then, Madison's run from her parents again, Hyejin's picked up another stray, and Hanna's stormed into Dr. Moon's apartment and brained him with a wrench. It's the work of an hour to dig up your friend's coffin with just the pair of shovels between the lot of you. Madison's the only one still sober, while Hanna's trashed enough to miss the grislier details of her lover's resurrection. Max is through his second pack of cigarettes, which you think is an improvement from his habit of playing with razor blades. To you, the nicotine simmering in the air is nostalgic, digging deep into your memory like a vagabond spirit. Alice gags and makes a face, eyes flitting between the dismembered corpse in Hanna's bag and the smoke rings Max kisses into the air. Madison swears like the white suburban Protestant that she is, defiling Christ with a masochistic pleasure. The blisters on her palms have burst, and her shaft is slick with blood. Tangled strands of powder-blue hair stick to her forehead with a cold sweat. A final thrust sees the blade of her shovel hit the coffin with a weighted *thunk*. You can't help but think of the sour *crunch*

of spiced cucumber in your mouth, the soft pressure of Alice's chopsticks hanging on your lips. Of gunpowder stinging your eyes through tinted glasses, and the weight of a stranger's grip on your shoulder. How your father would crumble eggshells in his palms, still sticky with yolk, lingering in the aftermath of his makeshift domestic. With the *crack* of flesh on wood, a featherless wing thrusts through the splinters of Rachel's coffin, and not a single prayer slips past your teeth.

Scapegoat

The doctor's hands sink into her skull like a slow wound. Strains the gray matter with his fingers, searching for odd clumps, fishing them out like ugly pearls. *Look at this*, he says, playing with a lump of her brain until it stretches out into a warm taffy. Out of it bursts bits of broken glassware, her childhood bath toys, a hammer, and her father's running shoes. The hammer stubs her foot. Her fists clench around the glassware, and dishwater pours out of the cuts. *Doesn't this seem familiar?* She's reclined on a seat across the desk from a psychoanalyst who claims to be a good friend of her mother's. Or was it the other way around? *Let's try that again*, he hums, brushing off the gray matter on his trousers. She wants to claim there's nothing wrong with her. Aside from the usual. The stuff her mother doesn't like to spread outside the family. Shouldn't he know that? The doctor talks about the symptoms of a disorder he never names: *Night terrors, sexual dysfunction, thoughts of suicide, dissatisfaction with a steady marriage*. Her bones feel oddly placed in her body, like a child put her together close but wrong. *I want to help you remember*, he insists. Her mother's disembodied head floats in a brass jar on the bookshelf, eyes round and insistent. *Be careful*, she says, as someone knocks on the door. *Come in, David*, the man says. *Let's talk about your child*. Her father is a faceless man wearing a lab coat over his army uniform. He advances even as she backs against her seat. His grip is hot and tight around her wrist. *I don't want to go with you*, she says. *I want to stay with the head in the jar*. The doctor leans forward, taking copious notes as her father's calloused fingers slip in through the corners of her mouth.

When Sarah wakes, she's alone in the passenger seat of Grace's car. The beat-up sedan is parked off the road, in the tall grass before the forest. The keys still hang from the ignition, and the stereo plays a gospel hymn from a Walkman, plugged in to the dashboard through a cassette adapter. According to the GPS suctioned to the windshield, they're in the countryside west of Calgary, just out of the mountains off the Bow Valley Trail. The inside of the car is muggy from the summer sunlight refracted by the windows, and there's a curious mix of sweat and dried orange peels that linger in the air. Sarah runs her hands down the stomach of her baggy blouse and smooths the wrinkles from her skirt. Her seatbelt's been undone sometime in her sleep. Not too far away she can see her mother standing by the asphalt, sucking on a cigarette despite the heat. She glances back at the *clunk* of the car door as Sarah emerges, stepping carefully through the grass towards the highway. Grace's pallid skin looks thicker under the sunlight. A trail of sweat slides down the slope of her neck, and a faint bruising crowns her lips.

"I used to dream about you," she says, exhaling smoke. "Before you were born. Yellow blossoms, each as bright as a star, cradled in the arms of a great tree rooted just outside my bedroom window. Down the hall I could hear David, still in his fatigues, drinking with my father in front of the television. I could hear an English news broadcast about a flying city, setting sail from the new America. My mother was alive and praying next to my bed because Heaven had brought her home for

the evening, so she could see her grandchild. And in my arms? I held a beautiful baby boy with a hint of fortune in his eyes.”

Grace keeps her eyes fixed on the mountains in retreat. Her grin is clenched, and full of teeth. Something like dread burns the back of Sarah’s throat, crawling through her body with a slow tremor. She’s waiting for the door to slam, and her father’s footsteps to shake the basement stairs. Curls her hands into fists over the hem of her skirt. Clenches her thighs and bites her tongue.

“Do you know what this dream meant to me,” Grace asks, “four years married, with my sister telling me I must be barren? When we were still in college, she never talked about settling down or finding love, because I was older and would be married before she would have to worry. I’d give our father the grandchild he’s always wanted, while she’d fly off to Germany and bury herself in the words of the dead men that climbed through history to find her heart. In my dream, everyone was happy with me because you were born. Then—the dream came true,” she groans, with a deep, *rumbling* sound, “and I could almost hold this picture in my mind, of my mother by my side again, raising a fuss about bathing you properly and feeding you right. My sister would come home for the summertime, to lavish you with presents and memories you’d soon grow to understand. It was all I ever wanted—my family, together again, finally *satisfied*—and didn’t I deserve that, after all I’ve done for *everyone*...?”

It’s not about you, Sarah wants to shout. Stops herself before she does, unsure if it’s the truth, but certain it would hurt. Especially with Grace caught up like this, in an imitation of regret that feels too much like the real thing. She knows where this is

going. Just like she knows if you put a cup too close to the edge of the dinner table it'll get knocked over onto the kitchen tile. Now she's just waiting for the glass to shatter.

"I should have left David sooner," Grace admits. "Taken you with me when I did, as you begged me to. We could have gone back to Korea and moved in with your grandfather for a while. He's such a gentle man, you would have loved growing up with him. You could have met my cousins, all the relatives you haven't seen since we left for America, when you were still a head shorter than my neck. When you didn't wear these skirts," she swallows, "or bruise so easily. Wouldn't you have liked that? Is *that* where we went wrong?"

Sarah steps back, the grass brushing against her naked calves feeling like the smooth sweep of a razor. Her mother's eyes are dark and wet and gleaming. She stumbles through her speech, holding her accent like a stone in her mouth. Reaches out for her, as if her fingers could dig the truth from her body better than her words ever could. Faint in the distance, Sarah can hear the doppler shift of a car gaining momentum, slipping past Grace's questions and the reverent lyrics rumbling from the stereo. Sarah presses against the door of the sedan. The heated glass simmers at her back with trapped sunlight.

"It's not too late," Grace says, her voice thick with smoke and water. "You're still so young. What's another year or two, when you have the whole world ahead of you?" She starts to croon, almost trying for a lullaby. "We can talk to another doctor, and you can go off your hormones for a while." She traces Sarah's clavicles with the points of her thumbs, pressing through the fabric of her shirt. "You'll feel so much better. We can fly to Gwangju for the holidays. You can heal from

this,” her gaze lingers on the bags just beneath your eyes. “Look at that,” she mutters to herself, “like David’s started drinking again.” She runs her hands up Sarah’s neck and cradles her head in sweaty palms. “Look at all these tangles in your hair.” Starts brushing back unruly curls, humming a soft tune. “Won’t you tell me what he did to you,” she wonders, “to make you so afraid of growing up to be a man?”

The growing roar of a passing vehicle thrusts them both out of their reverie. Sarah glimpses a bright white minivan as it slows before a curve. She can just make out the silhouette of a family on vacation, a picnic basket and camping bags cluttering the rear. For a moment, she meets the eyes of the woman in the passenger seat, and feels the heat build in her cheeks, before the stranger taps the driver on the shoulder and the car accelerates.

Grace untangles herself and steps back. Steadies herself with a slow breath that shudders through her frame. Sarah shuts her eyes and drowns herself in the drumming of her heart. *Thump-thump, thump-thump*. There’s an unpleasant curl forming just below her stomach that refuses to quiet and die. She’s half-collapsed against her mother’s sedan an hour’s drive from Calgary, and no small part of her wants to get behind the wheel and drive as far away as she can from Grace’s stillborn temper. *It’s a family thing*, she thinks, *to run away from the things we can’t resolve*. Or to circle back, like kinship is a bad habit that dwells in the lungs, constricting her breath. Grace fishes out a lighter from her jeans pocket, and frowns. *Flick, flick*, gasps the flame. “I’m all out,” she mutters beneath her breath, still loud enough for her child to hear. “Check the glovebox?”

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Sarah's hands are slick and aching with damp flour. Four neat rows of dumplings are splayed on the countertop before her. A singer croons a hymn in her birth language over the kitchen stereo. An exhausted dog lies at her feet, prostrate on the tile; the *fwip-fwap* of his slow tail keeps the beat of the song. A bead of sweat runs down the girl's neck with an idle itch. Behind her, Grace hums along with the tune as she kneads spices into the cabbage with naked fingers. She has a terrible voice that trails along with the key like wedding cans scraping against the asphalt behind the bridal car. White noise that could pass for a celebratory clamour given a perfect moment. The air runs thick with the sweet-sour notes of garlic and hot pepper. Sarah breathes through her lips to feel its familiar weight coat her tongue. Waiting out the evening in the kitchen of their home, they settle into a kind of armistice. As tenuous as her grip on the little squares of thin dough as she presses them into shape over the meat. It's something that could slip through her fingers just as easily as—a slip of the tongue, the bark of a dog, the skid of a chair, the ringing of the telephone in the study, the tune of the bell, the clatter of pills, the neighbours fighting, the skip of a heartbeat, the slam of a door, her screaming into a pillow at night, crying in her sleep: *Stop it, I don't want this, please don't*—until the dream *snaps* under the weight of these confessions, once dreamt and never told.

Metamorphosis

She loves to watch things break. It thrills her, ratchets up her heartbeat until you can see the blood boil in her body: a red flush spilling from her cheeks down to her breasts like a slow wound. Her approval slips through naked teeth, brushing against your ear: *Good girl*, she says, not a little cruel. The steep dive of your heart breaks through an atmosphere. You are something flat and monstrous and queer, odd bones under misshapen breasts and yellow skin, cock tight and ugly in her grip. She desires you because of it. Gets off on the *hurt* tangled with the *want* like the knots that trap your fingers in her hair. You shiver as if you've stepped through your own ghost. Never does the air starve in your lungs as it does when she watches you this way. With the weight of her against yourself, and her crooked finger in your mouth. Your eyes are laughing tears.

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Her name is Blake, and some days you hate her more than anything. She's irreverent like a teenager on the cusp of an apotheosis. Flies around the world on her grandfather's money and brings back souvenirs the way a magpie might gather tinsel. A postcard from the London Eye folded into a paper frog. Gaudy fake watches from a street market in Tijuana draped on her forearms. From the Philippines, a handmade slingshot she used to break through the window of the bedroom of her first ex-girlfriend. A stuffed doll dressed in a pink and green *hanbok* from the *Namdaemun* night market. She curls up against you on her bed to show you the pictures she took of strangers

whom she found erotic. Like flipping through a skimpy catalogue, just a touch obscene. If she gets drunk enough she'll tell you which ones she's fucked, idly reaching under your top with cold fingers. She swaps out the memory card when it gets full and forgets it in a drawer somewhere. You can tell when she's in a mood from how she's excavated old trinkets from the back of her closet to redecorate her bedroom. She goes about like she's the curator of her own small museum of curiosities. More a naturalist in the style of Darwin courting savages than Nabokov collecting butterflies. On your bad days, you wonder when she'll get tired of you just as she does everything else. Even after you start having sex with each other you're just friends. Relationships are what she has with foreign girls in their native cities before booking her return ticket. Flames burn out when the wax melts and the wick expires. What's left is the impression of a fragrance, an impossible nostalgia, and moonlight peering through the curtains.

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In the aftermath of an evening together she puts you back together like she's smashed a pretty vase. Runs her fingers against the cracks as lonely eyes might trace the woodgrains. Buries her hands in your hair and asks you about the little things. In the morning, you went out for a run and tripped over your own feet next to an empty playground. Tore open a juice box with your chipped teeth because you lost the straw. Sucked the sugar from your sticky fingers as the wind picked up along with the traffic. Dodged the ringing of a bicycle bell. Cut through a neighbor's backyard to get back to your Mom's squashed town-

house. Stepped out of your shoes and rubbed your sweaty feet on the rug after coming in through the back door. She drags you back awake with this blur of the everyday. You know you can't keep this up. One day she'll press too far, and you'll fall too deep. You can't climb back into your body if you don't recognize your own fingers. If you're just *a thing that wants Virginia*. Maybe it would be easier if you were brave enough to ask her not to grope you as if sex was just some animal rush to a climax. If to hurt in her hands felt any less good than it does.

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In the early days of your knock-off chrysalis Blake would take pictures of you naked with your back to the bathroom mirror to catalogue the changes to your body like a science project. You've been friends since before you can really remember. You share skinned knees and bruised lips and her mother's cigarettes. A common hatred for white boys that wear khakis and polo shirts. She pours milk in her ramen, so she doesn't kill her tongue. You think the mass of freckles that follow the blush of her throat are something quaint. One night she shows you how a virgin tried to fuck her on your body like biting the inside of your thigh was telling a story. The morning after you burn pancakes in the skillet. She dumps flour on your face and thinks the powder works better than your makeup. It's no surprise she wants to play a part in your own apotheosis. Thinks she can get there through the lens of a camera. Looking at your everyday from a distance. Run her fingers through the cracks in the firebrick in the aftermath of a bad fantasy. You don't know if you love each other, or if what you have is something stranger.

Apotheosis

It's been more than half a decade since Sophia's last been in her childhood home, and just as many years since she's seen Paul face-to-face. There's a pile of shoes clumped together on a dirty carpet next to the front door, and dust coating the partition between the foyer and the living space. Her mother's piano is tucked up against a corner, a coat draped over the lid and papers stacked on the bench. Paul's old IBM trackball laptop takes up a corner of the dining table, its power cord spooling across the surface between old dishes and plastic utensils. He rummages through cupboards of expired foodstuffs and canned meals before calling up the nearby Pizza Hut over his smartphone. His mouth hangs agape between sentences, exposing chipped teeth stained with nicotine. *Pepperoni and olives, stuffed crust, and a two-litre bottle of Coke.* He scratches the growing bald spot on his head in a nervous tick. Sophia takes a seat at the table with her satchel on her lap, the weight of the Diviner pressed against her stomach. Her father is fifty-two years old, and it's obvious he still can't quite take care of himself living alone. There are enough dirty dishes in the sink for Sophia to wonder if he's waiting for Mary to come home and do the chores. As if the presence of a ghost would be enough to fill out the empty spaces in this house that's barely a home: three chairs at the dinner table, a spare key stuck in the crevice of a loose brick, a woman's slippers on the mat before the sliding door to the backyard, and the same old Dodge Caravan parked in the driveway. Something in her expression must give away her exhaustion. He keeps a measured distance away from her, a hand in his pocket to quiet the *jingling* of his keys. Wipes the

sleep leftover from his own eyes with the point of his thumb. Powers down the kitchen stereo, cutting off the empty notes of a piano solo. Paul might have taught her to hold her tongue, but her mother's the one that left them both. Taught her words can pale in comparison to the finality of an action. Her father's long outgrown the need for a punching bag. She can't help but wonder what he thinks he'll find in her instead, looking at her like if he blinks for too long, she might slip into a noose and make herself disappear.

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Jack climbs in through the windowsill like they're still teenagers trading secrets late at night with the loyalty that comes from being the only visible freaks in the neighborhood. He's as stubbornly immune to the weather as always, dressed in a hockey hoodie and tight jeans that grope the bulge of his packer. *Your dad would never have let me in*, he smiles, as Sophia counts all the blunt and heavy objects in her room. A golf club under her bed smuggled from her uncle's kit the last time he was over on this side of the Pacific. A snow globe of *Gwanghwamun* clumsily rendered with thick squares of confetti blanketing the courtyard. The sleeping Diviner, buried in the satchel next to her bed, *clicking* away like a colony of wind-up insects only audible to her. *I wouldn't have either*, she says, and he flinches like she's already moved to strike him. The smile drops from his face with the rest of his confidence, as flurries of snow blow into the room and scatter against the carpet. She hasn't seen Jack since she packed up for college, changing her number and dropping her birth name along with the few friendships that

mattered to her in her adolescence. *We never got a chance to talk*, he says, and she does nothing but tuck her knees into her chest as he steps across the carpet in his dirty sneakers, to climb up on what little space there's left at the foot of her bed. Even in her own room she feels like a stranger. With her bones too loud for her body, thin with slow thoughts and malnutrition. An ache in her breasts under the fabric of her nightshirt. Orange pill bottles stuffed deep in the back of her bedside drawer. Like she's put herself together from the scraps tossed out after a domestic. Or from the salvaged hand-me-downs left over from her mother's epilogue. Jack fiddles with her snow globe as he talks, reading answers in her body that aren't quite legible to her, not in the middle of the night with a figment of her night terrors looking exactly as he did during their worst mistake. *I trusted you*, she thinks, and he turns to face her like she's said it aloud. *I know*, he says. *That's why it had to be me*. And the worst part of it is she can't believe he's wrong. Not in this place, where the walls of her bedroom climb into barricades, and little tourist figurines swarm the gates of the palace in the snow globe Jack tosses back and forth between his hands. Not when she can count her father's cigarettes in the cracks between his teeth and feel her mother's hands wrap around her neck to dig the Adam's apple out from her throat. As Jack tosses her around to slide against her back, the fabric of his binder scraping against her naked spine, to slip a knee between her legs and brush against her erection. *You'd make a beautiful girl*, he echoes, kissing the dip in her neck below the ridge of her skull, as she gasps into her sheets like a mockery of a girl hitting her climax. *Let me show you how*.

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In the end, Sophia doesn't need the *tick-tock* of the Diviner to lead her to the right spot in the forest. She stands before the stump sheltered in a goose-down coat and thick boots, hair pulled up into a practiced braid. Recognizes it as the spot Mary's corpse was found hanging from a sturdy branch, a pen in her pocket and a blank postcard crumpled in a cold fist, as if she meant to write a letter but didn't make the time. She remembers sucking her mother's ashes from her fingers after the funeral and coming to the realization that she's been left behind. She slips her gloves off her hands and drops them in the snow. Rubs heat into her palms, finding something sharp buried deep in her throat. The naked branches of the trees reach out towards the noonday sun. Soft footsteps *pitter-patter* in the snow behind her, and she dares not turn around. A warm body brushes against her calves. The fox's pelt is a vivid star against a sea of white. Nine wicked tails thrash soundlessly behind it like the bridal curtain of a wandering ghost. A sudden weight, and Sophia finds herself collapsed on her back, a paw pressing against the hollow of her throat. A grin filled with teeth and the lingering scent of carrion, brushing against her cheek with a lover's caress. The Diviner clatters uselessly at the base of the stump, of the corpse of the tree where her mother once hung. Laughter tears its reckless way out a locked box to which she thought she threw away the key. *I'm so glad*, Sophia says, as the fox's coarse tongue licks against her throat, nuzzles past the fabric of her winter clothes, and laps at a spot below her breasts, just above her liver. *I didn't want to do this alone*. It's familiar in a way she never thought possible for her, an ocean across

and a reality away from a home she could feel in her bones. Though it shouldn't have been a surprise. She knows how this goes, better than any girl should: the bite of something sharp, a flash of pain, the flush of adrenaline coursing through her blood. Like breaking down a gate to a castle from the inside. She's been intimate with the sensations of her slow collapse since the year her voice began to drop, and her father taught her how to shoot a rifle at the silhouette of a human being, a dark mirror standing unarmed and twenty paces apart. Sophia cries out as slender fingers dig into her organs and slip a bite of meat between the bright red lips of the woman crouching naked over her body, the slit pupils of a pair of luminous yellow eyes meeting her own.

Triptych

There's another message on the answerphone from your sister, sounding like you've caught her reading a verse from scripture, or an old poem. "Our father wants to see his son again," she says. "He wants to know what he's meant to do with himself, when his only children are a spinster and a transvestite. I'm paraphrasing," you can hear the shrug in her slow exhale, like she's slumped against the wall at her office, too many hours overtime, exhausted and adrift. "Don't come over this weekend, he's being insufferable." She pauses, just long enough for you to remember how your sister likes to gnaw on her lip to still her tongue, before you're hit with the dial tone. You grip the old phone in your hand, digging the blunt antennae into the soft spot under your chin. As if the separation between you and Madeline is something you could measure through this vulnerability in your flesh. There are many things you've lost in your life that you regret. Having your sister be the No-Man's-Land between you and your father is a smooth stone that's stuck down your throat. You'd swallow this weight if you could. Become the good child your widower of a father deserved, for living a virtuous life while trapped in the stomach of the whale of his grief. The price is too high. You can't calculate the meaning of the estrogen in your bloodstream, or the surgical scars framing your groin like a dirty picture, though the stack of overdue bills in front of you might try. You shuffle past an invoice from the hospital, sorting it with the utility and your roommate's work letters. Find a postcard from your old language tutor, mailed from her visit to the homeland: a shot of Seoul Tower with a dashed line struck across its base in Sharpie.

Haengbokhae, she writes. *I'm happy for you*. Perhaps *regret* isn't the right word. Not when you're alive enough to sometimes forget that's what should have been in question. One day, you'll grow tired of wishing for compromises. Of family reunions set with prayer and an empty seat at the dinner table. Until then, you have your sister's voice, ringing hollow in the armistice. Press *play* on the answerphone, again, and listen: she's there for you, in the silence she's left without a goodbye.

~

You take a sniff of your refill of green tea, gauging its temperature from how the steam clouds your glasses. In front of you is your flip-phone, a plate of crumbs, and a notepad, where you've sketched a quick cartoon of the woman sitting at the next table. White, in her forties, and dressed in a rumpled pantsuit that's seen better days. She's been staring at you intermittently for a while now, shifting in her seat as she glances at the bob of your neck, peering down to check if she can clock you through your skirt. Toying with her wedding band as she goes back and forth between the details of your physiology, and the markers of your womanhood you wear like little shields: pale blossoms painted on your nails, a loose blouse that slips off a shoulder to expose a bra strap, and your mother's cross on a thin cord hanging down your neck like her suicide. Your nicer pair of glasses, long stockings under sensible shoes. The woman's clearly expecting someone, from how her attention strays to the view of the street outside the café, buried by snowflakes and passerby. The manacle she makes with her grip on her wristwatch. You get the sense she's anxious for her friend

to arrive before you leave, wanting someone else to notice this spectacle she's found sopping up the mess from her drink with too many crumpled napkins. You've been texting back-and-forth with your roommate for the better part of an hour while she's stuck at work. *Spill your drink on her as you leave*, Esther writes, always vindictive at a distance. You tear out the cartoon from your notebook, thinking back to the origami your sister taught you when you were still a head shorter than her on your toes. You fold a passable imitation of a paper frog, which you leave behind alongside a still-steaming cup on your way out the door. You'd like to think the weight of the woman's eyes on your back is simply your imagination getting the better of you. Or that the stinging of your cheeks is just from sudden exposure to the cold. Wrap your scarf around your neck like a noose pulled taut with a white-knuckled grip. Try your best to breathe through the knot. Find your way back home.

~

You'd been living with Esther for a week when she first pulled you into her bed. "No strings," she said, trailing a finger across your throat. "This doesn't have to mean anything we don't want it to." Afterwards, as she pinned your wrists above your head with an idle strength, her breath still sharp from the mint she pried from your mouth, you took a moment to wonder what would happen in the aftermath. Back then, neither of you had been looking for an involved relationship. Both of you acknowledged that down the road, that might change. It hasn't—not as much as you thought it might. For the nights Esther brings home a partner, she texts you in advance. You muffle the *jingle* of your keys and step softly to your bedroom to drown out the

sounds of her sex beneath your headphones. Sometimes it's an invitation. You haven't brought home any of your dates. For some months, you hadn't looked too hard for casual sex, still healing from your surgery and tired of explaining the limits of your body to those more interested in fucking you than in hearing you talk. For the few who've tugged at your heart with all the friction of coarse rope and poor promises, you've quarantined to motel rooms and other people's beds. Most evenings are like this, instead: with Esther in her pajamas on your futon and a hand clasped in yours slick with sweat, the other holding a stent in place inside you, easing with your grip. You've been with her flushed and reckless with the curtains up, her head cradled in the sunlight, baring her teeth like she wants to see you fight. This is a more careful kind of intimacy, tenuous and strange, when *no strings* seem at once a death and the start of something new. Every exhalation she draws from you feels like a step off a ledge without the promise of her catching you when you drop. You'll forever be stuck in this moment—your flight before the fall.

Eudaimonia (II)

Rachel Moon peers into the duffle bag and *hums* with curiosity at the sight of her father's severed head. He's stuffed inside the canvas with the other pieces of his corpse, some left more intact than others, including an entire foot complete with wriggling toes.

"How did she fit all of you inside?" Rachel wonders, thinking of her old man's girth.

The head coughs, spitting out a finger. "Witchcraft," he says.

She shrugs, thinking it as good an answer as any. The head's eyes narrow in their sockets, and her father starts to splutter something that would doubtlessly hit her where it hurts—if she were listening, and not looking around the makeshift campsite to check on her friends.

Alice is the only one still awake, frowning down at her phone like the slab of circuits and glass is acting especially unpleasant tonight. Her on-and-off alcoholic of a girlfriend has slumped into her lap, lying with her body half-off the tarp and her naked feet buried in the snow like a lunatic. Hanna's bundled up in three different coats, two over her torso and another around her legs. She's tucked in like a cocoon against Madison, who's probably spiteful enough to keep herself warm at any temperature, her palms slowly bleeding a garden of roses with Christian fervor. Max is—somewhere, Rachel's sure, sleepwalking to a corner store to buy more cigarettes and piss out his nightmares in a restroom stall. Hyejin left a while ago, chased off by a grinning white fox with *jingling* bells tied to each of its many tails.

The head pipes up with something vulgar, so Rachel shakes the bag like a Magic 8-Ball until he comes up with a better answer. “Be nice, Yorick,” she mutters, distracted by the sight of the cracked tombstone at the head of the gaping wound that was her gravesite. *What an eyesore*, she thinks, hoisting the duffel on her shoulder and picking up a shovel.

Swish, thwack! She slams the tombstone with the head of the shovel, to absolutely no effect.

Swish, clang! The blade works no better, and the severed head begins to laugh.

Rachel tries hitting the tombstone with the grip of her shovel. *Bang, bang, bang!*

“Madison gave that a go already,” Alice calls out distractedly, thumbs tapping away at her phone, *Korobeiniki* spilling from her earbuds. “Gave up when she broke the other shovel.” Said bluenette stirs in her sleep, mumbling what might have been a dirty joke, before digging her face deeper into Hanna’s cocoon.

“You could bury it instead,” says the head, oddly helpful. “Not that it worked for you.”

Rachel shrugs, and drops the shovel. She then swings the bag at the tombstone.

Swish, crack! The tombstone crumbles.

“I didn’t deserve that,” the head cries, somehow still intact.

“You killed me,” Rachel says without much temper, kicking the rubble into her grave.

“You killed yourself,” the head replies. Rachel shakes the bag. “Strung yourself up like your mother did, the crazy bitch. At least she had a good excuse. I thought I raised you smarter.”

She flips the bag upside-down over her grave. The head

gives a muffled shout. Out falls a ribcage stuffed with ping-pong balls, then several power tools, a flurry of bloodied feathers, a lumpy organ with a faint greenish glow, and a mostly intact member swaddled in a miniature *Taegukgi*. The head clings to the canvas with his teeth, somehow growling without a throat, or either of his lungs. Rachel shakes the bag again, and out pours the rest of her father, along with his wallet, his passport, and an odd number of shoes. The head cries out as he loses his grip—only to bounce off a part of his corpse and land back at Rachel's feet.

"Go back to sleep," Alice nudges the girl on her lap. The others don't stir, more or less dead to the world. Slow footfalls through the slush herald Max's return, eyes shut and shambling, steering for the sleeping bag tucked against a nearby sepulchre.

"You're persistent," Rachel grumbles at the head.

"And you're not," The head snipes.

"You talk too much," she shoots back, and steps on him to shut him up. "I heard enough from you back when we were still alive. Always shouting at Mom, chasing her out into the street at the smallest mistake. Or when you had a shitty day, and we were the closest targets. Treating us as toys for your tantrums. Like anything either of us did was always about you."

The head rolls out from under her foot. "I took care of you," he snarls. "Raised you, taught you our language and our history. Worked harder than my father or my brothers ever did, so you'd never have to learn how hunger feels, or stir sleepless at night because there's holes in the mosquito netting and flies buzzing around like the very insects are waiting for you to give up and die." The head spits at Rachel's feet. "And for all my hard work, what do I get? A spoiled princess for a wife

when the kings are dead and gone. And a freak for a child that dressed like a whore and grew up to be a suicide—!”

Rachel kicks the head clear across the campsite and down the hill. He rolls through the snowfall, coughing and hacking, until coming to a stop by the street. He shouts incoherently into the night, daring a car to come and run him over to put him out of his misery.

Rachel seethes, mottled grey wings extended twice again her height across. *Snaps* the shaft of her shovel with a stomp. Kicks the blade into the pit with the rest of her father and all his plastic, copper, and silk. Strangles the scream that builds up in her throat.

“Even the end of my story gets to be about him,” the dead girl cries. “What a fucking joke.”

Alice doesn’t respond, asleep at last. Her phone slips from her hands and slaps onto her lover’s head. Hanna’s cocoon rests plump and still with promise. The roses Madison painted with her hands have begun to bloom. Max is sprawled face-down in the snow like the afterbirth of a snow angel. *Jingle, jingle*, sounds a laughter of bells in the distance, with all the slow rhythm of a ghost story, or a folk song.

Rachel takes one last look at her slumbering friends. Wonders how long it will be before they see each other again. Would they meet in the same afterlife, or will they have to wait until the stars begin to falter and God reaches out to swipe the board clean to build Her next paradise? She finds the cooler next to Alice, stuffed with *soju*, rice cakes, and chicken soup. Hefts it under an arm with a soft smile and makes her way down the hill, following the trail left by the quick descent of her father’s severed head. She steps into the street, picking him up by his

hair. He curses like a tired dockworker: almost out of habit and without much heat.

“You’re taking me with you?” he growls. “Idiot child.”

The dead girl idly flaps her wings, vestigial without the feathers to fly. *Swish, swoosh*. She trudges through the snow on aching feet, her sleeves rolled up, her shirt torn open, and her jacket tied around her waist in the imitation of a skirt. Her father’s head swings back and forth in her grip like the sliding weight of an old metronome, keeping pace with the sluggish drumbeat of her resuscitated heart.

“Heaven or hell, old man,” Rachel says, neither bitter nor fond. “It doesn’t matter where you go. I’ll be there to haunt you in your dreams.”

